



Pierre Olivier Joseph Coomans

1816-1889

Secret Love

Oil on canvas signed and dated 1857 lower left

Dimensions : 125 x 105,5 cm

Dimensions : 49.21 x 41.34 inch

Exhibition : Union Artistique, Exposition des Beaux-Arts de Toulouse en 1862, p.39 n°73 sous le titre Brune et Blonde

Origin : Private Collection, Germany (1983 acquired at Neumeister)



Dimensions with frame : 153 x 133,5 cm  
Dimensions with frame : 60.24 x 52.36 inch

Dated 1857, this painting comes at a key moment in the life and work of Joseph Coomans. Arriving in the Naples region in 1856 after contracting cholera on the battlefields of Crimea a year earlier, he married Adélaïde Lacroix, who gave him two daughters. The painter remained very close to his daughters Heva and Diana, who both became painters, perpetuating their father's style.

During this period, Coomans regained a taste for life and painting. He rediscovered happiness and lightness, having experienced the grief of losing his first wife and the mother of his son in 1848, and life with the military in the Crimea.

His new-found happiness, combined with the bucolic atmosphere of Naples and the frescoes of Pompeii, influenced Coomans towards a stylistic renewal that would make him one of the masters of the so-called

Pompeian painting presented at the various Salons from 1857 onwards. "L'orgie des philistins dans le temple de Dragon", the first painting in this style to be exhibited at the Salon des Beaux-Arts in Paris that year, met with critical acclaim as one of the spearheads of this new artistic movement. From the same year, our painting is at the confluence of the Orientalist and Pompeian styles that would make the painter's reputation.

In 1862, a painting by Coomans was presented under the title "Brune et Blonde" at the Exposition des Beaux-Arts in Toulouse. This is most probably our painting. This pivotal work is nourished by the Romantic, Oriental and Pompeian influences that characterize the painter's work.

## Biography

Pierre Olivier Joseph Coomans was a Belgian painter, illustrator and engraver. He was born in June 1816 in Brussels. Student of Pierre de Hasselaere at the Academy of Gand and then of Nicaise de Keyser and of the Baron Wappers at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Anvers, he specialized in history painting and genre scenes.

In 1841, he exhibited " The Fall of Jerusalem by the Crusaders " and achieved great success, as well as with " The Battle of Absalon " in 1842.

Between 1843 and 1845, he was sent by the Queen Louise-Marie of Orleans in Algeria to join the French army in Kabylie. There, he worked for the general Marechal Thomas-Robert Bugeaud and met the painter Horace Vernet. Coomans brought numerous sketches back from his journey, making his first steps in orientalism. These sketches gave birth to " Arab Women dancing ", " Landscape of the province of Constantine " but also " Battle of Attila in the catalaunic fields ". He is considered Belgium's first Orientalist painter.

In 1854 and 1855, he joined the general Aimable Pélistier and worked during the Crimean War as a military painter, making studies for " The Battle of Alma " in 1855.

After this military painting career, he established himself nearby Naples and was fascinated by the ruins of Pompei. This discovery changed his painting and his topics. He gradually left Orientalism for genre and family scenes inspired by antiquity.

After visiting Greece and Turkey, he moved to Paris in 1860 where he developed a classic and academic style. He frequently exhibited at the Salon where he was particularly noticed for his painting " The Dream ".

Coomans also illustrated books like " The History of the French Revolution ", " My prisons " by Sivio Pellico, " The Belgian depicted by themselves " or " The History of Belgium " written by his brother, Jean-Baptiste Coomans. This work contributed to his great reputation in Belgium.

Joseph Commans won numerous awards during his career, including the Vermeil Medal in Brussels in 1848, the Gold Medal in The Hague in 1859, and Chevalier de l'Ordre de Léopold in 1870. He was also named a full member of the Société des travaux littéraires et artistiques, on October 17, 1863. That same year, his painting "Le dernier jour de bonheur" (The Last Day of Happiness) was purchased by the Emperor during the Paris Salon. Involved with the artists of his time, he took part in the sale of works donated by French artists to the Chicago incendiaries on May 15 and 16, 1872 in New York with his painting "Une fille de Pompéi".

His work enjoyed international success, particularly through the distribution of lithographic and photographic reproductions. He ended his career with a trip, at the age of 72 with his two daughters, to Philadelphia and New York, where he painted mainly portraits. He died on December 31, 1889 in Boulogne-sur-Seine, where he lived with his daughters.

## Museums

Royal museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Bruxelles

Royal Palace, Bruxelles

Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart

## Bibliography

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SCHURR Gerald, CABANNE Pierre, " Dictionnaire des Petits Maîtres de la peinture (1820-1920) ", Tome I, Les éditions de l'amateur, 1996, p.289

E. BENEZIT, " Dictionnaire des peintres, sculpteurs, dessinateurs et graveurs ", Gründ, tome 3, 1999, p.853

Académie royale de Belgique, " Nouvelle biographie nationale ", volume 14, Bruxelles, 2018, p.61-63